Center for Immigration Studies

Backgrounder

June 2003

The Universe of the Illegal Alien

By Victor Davis Hanson

It is worth considering the world of illegal immigration as it appears to the unlawful alien — a cosmos that I know something about as one who has worked in orchards and vineyards side by side with farm workers for much of my life.

One thing this alien knows in his heart: There is a simple reason why Americans do not do farm work, one that transcends even the absence of real money and any status. *It is physically hard to pick peaches all day.* The dilemma of farm work was never that it was necessarily low-paid, but rather that it offered good wages on the condition that one was young, healthy, and able to move on to something better before old age and infirmity set it in.

The *trabajador* lives and works in a world of young men. They survive for the most part as small teams, under conditions of illegality, apart from their families, and in extremis are prone to settle disagreements with knives and worse. We should never forget that as a rule, most illegal aliens come as single young males (solos) — and in the history of civilization it is single, transient young men who build bridges and roads, but also bring societies their crime and violence.

A Taste of Prosperity

Despite the dangers and drudgery, however, the wage for menial labor in America is far better than anything earned in Mexico. An unskilled laborer from the Sierra Madre is lucky to make $25 a week; in California he can easily earn nearly $10 an hour and often more. To the worker, the initial realization that there is such an El Dorado is dazzling, quite unbelievable. Young males under 30 years of age in their first tour of duty in America seem starved for work. They toil 10 hours a day — amazed that they have more money in their wallets in a week than they once had in an entire year.

I sometimes think that only the vast contrast with Mexico keeps the illegal alien in America alive; only the memory of the former harshness of real hunger, dirt floors, untreated illnesses, and outdoor privies in Mexico steels him for what he must face in America. I once asked two raisin-tray rollers how they felt after 10 hours of labor on their knees in 110-degree weather — "Better than in Mexico," one said. I thought to myself, "Well, better than in Hell too, I suppose." I paid them $100 each, but noticed that their car's starter was just about out, and figured they had rolled all day for the cost of getting home.

Envisioning a Triumphant Return. To talk with these young men is to hear of extravagant dreams — all culminating in a grand and permanent return to their village in central or southern Mexico: a ranchero, a new block house, two Chevy pickups, alligator boots, black felt hat, jewelry — all the Mexican signs of material success in America. Of course, the university activists who see them-

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selves as illegals' advocates ridicule such notions of instant wealth as impossible to garner through unskilled labor. But they err in two ways: Much of the wages for yard work, cement, roofing, and farming is paid on a cash basis, without the deductions for Social Security, Medicare, workman's compensation, state and federal taxes — the miasma of debits that easily can shrink an American's paycheck by a third to a half. Our young professors at California State University, Fresno, some with Ph.D.s from Berkeley and Stanford, will be lucky to take home $2,000 a month after deductions — appearing on the pay stub in some 10 categories including state, federal, Social Security and Medicare taxes, health, dental and vision insurance fees, state retirement, parking, and union dues. Some undocumented workers in construction can put in 200 hours of work per month, and at $10 cash per hour they match the English professor — without the tie, the decade's worth of degrees, the need to master the lingo of postmodernism, and the entire drain of life insurance, lawn care, and braces for the kids.

Second, there is the much-remarked-upon gulf between the cost of living in California and the cost of surviving in rural Mexico. Everything from tortillas to changing a tire is a fraction of the price south of the border. If the *campesino* can go south with a van full of consumer goods unavailable cheaply in Mexico — stereos, cell phones, televisions, washers and dryers — the daily tab to eat, sleep, and relax in his home pueblo is otherwise rather low. The dream of the young worker, then, is that he might earn money as a Mexican in America and then go home to live like an American in Mexico.

There is also a third mystical force in play that explains the alien's zeal to work so hard to acquire American dollars for a dream of returning home. Mexico is a hierarchical society, where skin color, accent and ancestry determine one's social place, from the upper echelons of Mexico City to the governor's office in Yucatan. Not so in America, whose crass plutocracy has always valued money above breeding, diction, education, even hue and religion. In this connection, I think of Pepe Madrigal, who used to run crews of some six hundred men in Selma, drove a Mercedes, had two diamond rings, and lived in a beautiful home in nearby Sanger, not far from my farm. A millionaire here — before the IRS shut him down for failure to forward the FICA deductions of his workers — he claimed that he was a virtual billionaire in his Mexican hometown. There, in the eyes of his former *compadres*, he was apotheosized from a rural *campesino* into a *nuevo rico* who claimed he could buy the entire landscape of his birth, its petty aristocrats, snobs and bigwigs thrown in for good measure. ("Hell, I'll buy the Church and the padre too if they will sell it," he once remarked to me.) For the rustic Mexican who occupies the bottom rung of a static society and has virtually no chance of upward mobility, America represents not just an escape from drudgery, but the phantasm of redemption — a way not so much of getting rich, but of getting even.

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Pipe Dreams. Yet most Mexicans in America never return home permanently, and the dream of Pepe Madrigal remains mostly a fantasy; Mexico, after all, is still a class-bound society where an Indian with ample capital can never quite make it. Oh, they may go back and forth yearly, but few choose to stay south. And here we collide again with the dilemma of illegal immigration. For all the brutality of America, the immigrant senses a weird sort of kindness here. Or at least he senses the presence of a select and liberal group of Americans in health care, law, education, and government who feel it is their duty to help him, of all people — the lowly immigrant! And their efforts are not paltry. The well-intentioned Americans can deliver to the illegal immigrant housing, medicine, and food at a level beyond almost anything found even among the well-off in Mexico City.

I often fly eastward via Phoenix with aliens from Fresno on their way to Guadalajara; the overhead compartments on the plane are stuffed with wrapped fishing rods, fax machines, and boxes of vitamins and medicine. But what follows from that? Is there an ophthalmologist in the town square back home to treat your glaucoma? Can you show up with a 103-degree temperature at the local clinic and be given an instantaneous shot for strep, with free sample bottles of new antibiotics accompanied by kind words

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of encouragement from a Stanford Medical School intern? And will your children come home with notices from the local school advising you about free study halls, college scholarships, and mental health counseling — along with a printed lecture from an ambitious principal about his own proven commitment to "diversity" and "the richness of a multicultural perspective"? Is there a chance that being "Hispanic" in America bodes better for your children than remaining an "Indian" in Mexico? The finest universities of Mexico do not scout out Indians from Oaxaca to redress historic imbalances in their enrollment; America's Ivy League does.

No, the immigrant senses that — whether out of altruism, guilt, or coercion — the crazy gringos in America treat him better than his beloved amigos in Mexico. So it is harder than one expects to cut this new umbilical cord he has grown in America. Tricky also it is to forsake the mall, the summer blockbuster movie fare, or the free and modern emergency room. Mexican television in America broadcasts not dry notices of immigration reform or Mexican consulate seminars, but splashy Jerry Springer-like talk shows, where Chicanas with dyed blond hair, breast implants and bare navels wiggle in the audience and chatter in hot tubs, unlike anything that used to be aired in the village plaza in Mexico. America, it turns out, gets into one's blood. A Mexican once told me, "I'm Siamese twins — my Mexican and American heads so glued together I can't turn in either direction."

Fleeting Aspirations

But just because the illegal alien visits Mexico without staying permanently does not necessarily mean he is happy in America. Within three years — five at most — a series of stark realizations about the United States begin to crystallize in the mind of the alien. Most of those under 25 that I encounter are perpetually smiling. They bounce, not shuffle, on the sidewalk. They laugh out loud. Not so their elders 40 and above. I see the Great Awareness etched on their faces. These guys grimace and wave their hands in anger, exhibiting more frustration than can be attributed to the ambiguity of middle age. A Mexican male who may be 50 often looks 60 and walks as if he is 70.

He begins to see that he is the beleaguered root, while a myriad of others are the fleshy stalk, leaves, and fruit of the immigrant experience. He goes to bed at 9 P.M. so as to rise at 4 A.M. — unlike the others who profit far more and off him. In his immediate circle there are the contractors who take him to work and bring him home. For that easy effort, they make not $10 an hour, but $100. (Californians deplore the dismal safety record of farm labor vans. Hundreds with crude wooden benches, no seat belts, bald tires and intoxicated drivers, overloaded with 15 workers, overturn each month — prompting the California Highway Patrol to bring in new rules, inspections and education programs. We lament all that, but must remember that these mobile coffins are not "vans" so much as taxis, which can bring the unlicensed and unregulated owner-driver of a dilapidated $600 vehicle a profit of over $1,000 a week.)

Preying Parasites. The agricultural leeches are only the alpha, not the omega that surrounds the unskilled laborer. Beyond them is a virtual army of parasites. The coyote who smuggled him in makes tens of thousands of dollars. The forger who gives him the false identification earns hundreds. The landlord who rents him — and two others — the use of a bed, not a room, garners as much or more. The woman who provides him sex, the local market that cashes his check for a cut, the used-car salesman who has him sign 22 pages of guarantees for a car with a cracked engine block — all these and more profit from the arms and back of the illegal alien.

Soon he butts up against the bizarre and pricey world of white America — the strange country that sends things in the mail and on time like parking tickets, hospital bills and collection notices, and on occasion can haul away your car even as you sleep should you not pay the final $300. I have had dozens of aliens

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bring me all sorts of Byzantine papers, from welfare applications to I-9 forms; often they are bewildered and at times outraged that such mystic runes should apply to them and that I, with a Ph.D., cannot figure them out either. Better, they finally say after I have thrown up my hands, to ignore them — or in extremis hire a sharp Mexican *abogado* who knows the ropes.

Such lawyers, in fact, abound for taking care of things that finally can no longer be put off — everything from workman's compensation claims to personal injury suits. Remember, the alien legal industry is a multibillion-dollar enterprise that ultimately depends on the backs of those picking, pruning, and cleaning. Mostly, lawyers are there to "help" you find papers, bring up your mother, avoid jury duty, buy a house, start the process of citizenship, evade deportation — all at $100 an hour, "special" for a fellow *paisano*. The *Fresno Bee* is full of their ads. On Spanish-speaking television they are every bit as obnoxious as English-speaking shysters. They are amusing to the white legal community — snobs and fools who have no idea that a good Spanish-speaking lawyer with a less impressive degree who specializes in immigration or civil law can make far more than a Boalt Hall graduate in Sacramento's top firm.

The alien realizes that even his nether world of undocumentation is still not so undocumented. Even if he sleeps in a southwest Fresno apartment building, paying $200 a month for ten hours' use of a bed; even if he catches a ride in a labor van for $10 round-trip; even if he buys beans and soda in bulk at Food-for-Less for $100 a month — there are still those who can steal his $3,000 roll of cash — legally and with impunity — and all in the noble service of keeping him in America, out of jail, and away from notice. Rodrigo Pena, a brilliant crew boss, summed it up best for me something like this:

> *There are only the two kinds who go to the bank — those to check on their money or those who go to get some. No in-betweens. $25,000 in cash a year isn't bad, but walk into a bank with that and try to get a loan, and they point you to the door. Mexicanos are the only people with cash stuffed in their pockets and still are worth no money.*

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The Force of Envy

Chewey Escobar, now 38, whom I met when he was looking for work at 15, at last has noticed that all the people in the American Southwest who do the least sought-after work are, like himself, Mexicans — whether washing windows, making beds at the hotel, hauling trash, or picking lettuce. Why is this so? Chewey has a vague idea that the absence of education, degrees, contacts, perfect English, and years (if not centuries) of family roots in America can mean that you blow leaves while some pink person in slippers and bathrobe sips coffee and watches you from a glass-enclosed solarium by the pool.

Someone like Chewey cannot help but think something like: "I work, she does not. I sweat and lift and pick, and they sit and talk." Envy, it turns out, is a powerful new force in the life of the alien — especially when so often he is not mixing with America's middling classes, but hired as a gardener, nanny, or unskilled laborer by our more affluent. That I tell him there are millions of poor whites who far outnumber impoverished Mexican-Americans makes no impression; it is the contrast — Mexican help, white helped — that he is obsessed with.

An Elusive Affluence. Since the age of Cortés, Mexico has been a distorted medieval economy in which a few thousand manorial families own the entire country. But even this great disequilibrium of wealth in a feudal Mexico is not so psychologically injurious to the peasant as is the ubiquity of the American upper-middle class. In Mexico, real money is far distant, never sprinkled about the countryside in the form of luxurious haciendas or sparkling condos. The far fewer Mexican wealthy act differently; they live in castles, so to speak, and remind you that they are the *patrones*, and not the sort of folk that *clientes* can chat with between spraying shots of

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How soon one metamorphoses from being a guest grateful for the privilege of having plentiful, clean food to being churlish because his house lacks central air conditioning cannot be calculated exactly; but the divide between appreciation and resentment is not wide.

Miracle Grow and Malathion on their petunias, as they do in egalitarian America.

You can snip the roses of an orthodontist who is worth a cool 10 million and yet stands a few feet away from you, talking on his cell phone. His garage, which you wheelbarrow weeds by, is filled with a Mercedes, a Lexus, and a BMW. You can skim his pool with Jacuzzi and treat it for algae while he sits by its side. In fact, you may be at his estate — painting, spraying weeds, changing diapers — more than he, who after all must somehow pay for it all. In America the wealthy — often rising from the middle and lower classes — are ostentatious, familiar, accessible, and so a generous and constant reminder that while you may be royalty compared with those of your station still in Mexico, you, the service worker, are still a peon in the American plutocracy.

Success Is Relative. The alien's water is, of course, as clean as a millionaire's. He drives on the same freeway. His windbreaker from Wal-Mart looks no different from the Wall Street tycoon's informal wear. All that and more makes America the most superficially equal nation in the history of civilization, where skill and luck, not just birth and breeding, gain money. America is what Rome once was to hustling Jews, Greeks, and Numidians, whose millions of sesterces allowed them to buy the privilege of wearing an ancestral toga with a purple stripe and a signet ring of onyx — to the exasperation of old Italian knights.

But again, envy — what the Greeks called *phthonos* — is not logical. Rather, it is inborn in man. You can have 10 times what you had in Mexico, but still be miserable that you have one-tenth what others in America do. In Mexico a flush toilet, clean water, and a warm bath make you a rural aristocrat; in America, access to such amenities is expected and considered only the beginning of the good life, not the *summum bonum*. How soon one metamorphoses from being a guest grateful for the privilege of having plentiful, clean food to being churlish because his house lacks central air conditioning cannot be calculated exactly; but the divide between appreciation and resentment is not wide.

Many Americans who live in suburban houses, drive SUVs, and go to a fern bar for predinner drinks, have forgotten this age-old elemental drive to surpass your neighbor in the most visible ways. True, Americans engage in cold war over the quality of a rye-grass lawn or the size of a stained glass window on an oak front door, but they rarely feel in their gut the angst over working hard and sweating, trapped in menial labor in proximity to others who are not — and who are quite oblivious to their plight.

So the alien must deal with a strange new schizophrenia that begins to consume him. Success in America is too often a relative rather than an absolute concept — and felt as such by the alien most of all. We are, after all, notorious for our constantly rising expectations and appetites. Many Americans no sooner have satisfied their material dreams than they begin to feel either bored or furious that someone else — someone "undeserving" or "lazy" — has more.

Only for a Time

As the illegal immigrant begins to learn about this strange new country, he notices another truth every bit as bothersome as the gulf between the sweaty world of muscle-power and the air-conditioned world of paper pushing. The immigrant life cycle turns inexorably: the wheel of fortune tears him up alive — unless he gets off before it begins to go south. The world of grapes, shingles, and nails is a young fellow's universe. Between 18 and 40 the shoulders, back, knees, and elbows can withstand the daily hefting, bending, and pounding. Such bodies are paid that princely $10 an hour precisely for their energy and stamina. Cuts and abrasions heal in days, not weeks. Colds and flu do not linger. Time in itself is a swirl of emotion and sensuality, not a period for sober reflection that money should be bankrolled while cartilage is still supple and not yet arthritic.

I know this in my own bones. At 26 I could sulfur 120 acres of vines in a day, racing the tractor in sixth gear to cover 10 acres an hour, oblivious to a sea of chemical and vineyard dust, careless as to the ef-

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fects of pounding on the ears and the shaking seat on the kidneys. I liked the fact that I was not behind a desk. At dusk I could hop off the tractor and shower, then forget that I had ever spent 12 hours on the same seat, losing money for the effort. Not so at 48 — two hours on the Massey-Ferguson are misery. Grime in the nose triggers allergies; ears ring for days from the blast of the machine. The body can take two decades of such daily punishment, but not four. With increasing debts and obligations, I am now very bothered by the thought that I lose money sweating on the tractor, and make money only when cool and rested and sitting at a desk.

A Bachelor's Existence. All these contradictions the immigrant also slowly senses as he looks at the weak picker in a crew of 10 who at age 50 can scarcely scale the ladder. He doesn't like hombres with gray hair on a four-man gondola team. They are too slow and don't carry their weight in getting the cut grapes into the pan. They shuffle rather than trot down the rows. They represent his bleak future rather than his optimistic present. There is a reason why *el jefe*, the contractor, has a belly, ridiculous snake-skin boots, three golden teeth and a stiff cowboy hat that would blow off in a minute of real work: he is 55, not 20, a veteran of the fields, not an amateur, and often ailing and wizened rather than fresh and naïve. But the aging of the unskilled worker is not merely degenerative in the physical sense. It encompasses what one described to me as "the whole thing" — which I take to mean wife, kids, dog, and house. A man alone may be wealthy even at $10 an hour; he is an utter pauper at the same wage with a pregnant wife, two children in diapers, and a three-bedroom apartment with a clunky car in the stall and one in worse condition on blocks.

If you chain-saw firewood or clean bedpans at the rest home, as a single person you can still go to the movies, eat out now and then, and put a down payment on a nice car. That freedom is non-existent when there are six of you who depend on the wages of house-painting and brick-laying. The greatest hazard to the illegal immigrant is a large family — the truth that is never mentioned, much less discussed. Everything that he was born into — parents, priest, reigning mores — tells him to have five boys, better six or seven, to carry on the family name, ensure help in the fields, give more souls to God, provide visible proof of virility, and create a captive audience at the dinner table.

The last thing America wants is a Spanish-speaking man 50 years old with dependents but no skills and a bad back.

In contrast, everything America values — money, free time, individual growth, secular pleasure — advises the opposite. Quite often for the unskilled laborer, five children instead of two is the difference between death and life. I must mention here the even surer form of suicide: the presence of not one family, but two. A common-law woman and kids in Huron and a simultaneous wife with eight more in Jalisco prescribe a heart attack at 40. A tile setter I know tells me that he works every evening to pay for the wife and three dependents in Monterey, Mexico — and every morning and afternoon for the wife and twins in Madera, California.

Just as his body slows down, the alien's obligations mount. Such a physical metamorphosis is as apparent to him as a darting tadpole's change into a tired old frog. Quite simply, the last thing America wants is a Spanish-speaking man 50 years old with dependents but no skills and a bad back. He has a tendency to stay home more than he works; he is bitter rather than upbeat; his romance with America is now more like a nightmare. He can become a baleful influence on his numerous kids, who hear of doubt and anger, not of retirement accounts and a vacation home in the mountains. If we wonder why the hardest-working alien in California sires sons who will not do the same kind of labor, who have tattoos, shaved heads, and prison records rather than diplomas, we need look no further than the bitterness of the exhausted, poor and discontented father. His back and knees, after all, won him no victory at 50, but in his mind they won a four-car garage for someone else.

Discarded and Replaced

When the alien can no longer stucco a house or plaster a pool, most contractors must turn him loose — falsely confident that all those years of expensive deductions and bothersome paperwork should at least pay for workman's compensation, state disability, Sec-

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tion 8 housing, food stamps, welfare, unemployment, or some other government dole that will keep a tired Manuel or an ill Ramon alive. Most aliens in their fifties and sixties who are worn out, obese, diabetic, alcoholic, or injured stay indoors, do indeed live on some sort of assistance, and venture out for a day or two each week to pick a few plums, lay four yards of concrete, or dig some trenches for cash between afternoon cartoons and Oprah. Drive into any central California town at 11 A.M. and you will see hundreds of adult males walking the sidewalks, sitting in cafes, milling around at the stores, or loitering in front of their apartments — all of them not working, all of them on some sort of donation, and most of them wounded veterans of some of the hardest jobs in America. Our government says that local Central Valley towns experience a 15 percent unemployment rate. The naked eye suggests instead that a quarter of the populace lacks a full-time job.

Meanwhile, America needs replacements for these undecorated veterans. Thus an entire new cohort comes north to renew this strange, unspoken cycle in the traffic of humankind. In almost every city in California, there is a familiar street, park or lumber yard parking lot where dozens of healthy Mexican men, 15 to 30 years of age, congregate to hire themselves out for a day as laborers — hoping that a contractor will bid well for 10 hours' use of their backs. Because we are an instinctual, rather than an explicitly expressive, society, we have no placards on the border — something like the entryway admonishment of Dante's Inferno — to warn the newcomer of our brutal world:

> *Beware all you who would enter. Here are the rules: you are welcome to work hard between 20 and 40. But then please retire at 50 and return home. Stay young, healthy, single, sterile, and lawful — and we want you; get old or injured, marry, procreate, or break the law — and we don't.*

This illegal alien business is a hazardous odyssey in America, replete with modern-day Sirens and Cyclopes that can lure the immigrant onto the rocky coast or even eat him outright. A few deftly navigate their way home, but more, increasingly, flounder on our shores.

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